

Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco Delta Regional Authority Conference New Orleans, October 21, 2004

Thank you, Pete, for that kind introduction.

And thank all of you for being here today.

As most of you know, starting next January, I will help lead the Delta Regional Authority. My counterparts from the seven other member states have asked me to serve as the authority's co-chair. I am honored to be entrusted with this responsibility.

I want to take a moment and thank Gov. Mike Huckabee for his leadership of the DRA's three-year history. He took the DRA from mere words on the pages of a piece of legislation to a functioning organization that is working to improve the lives of real people in the Delta.

And, I want to thank Ron Wilson who just joined the administration as executive director. Ron, I guess we're the new kids on the block.

I relish this opportunity to direct this young organization. The authority is in a unique position to help find, use and share ways to solve a big problem each of our states share – and that is poverty.

With all eight states cooperating ... working together with federal agencies and a spectrum of non-profit groups ... sharing knowledge, experience and insight ... we will see the Delta rise and shed the weight of systemic poverty.

The DRA's founders laid the foundation for this work. Thank you, Pete, for nursing the agency along in these early years. I look forward to working with you we set long-term goals and a strong vision for the future.

We all know the problems our Delta residents face: reduced life expectancy and high cancer rates ... increased teen-pregnancy rates and lower birth weights ... low graduation rates and high unemployment.

The list goes on. We know what's on it.

I also understand what the Delta Regional Authority stands for: an approach to improving the lives of the people on that list ... an approach that cuts across state lines ... an effort that leads to cooperation ... of sharing solutions ... of working to develop economies on a regional scale ... of dropping barriers and embracing success.

In December, I'm calling a Louisiana conference to explore and share solutions to poverty. We're getting a spectrum of people from state, parish and local governments ... from private industry and non-profit organizations ... to share their knowledge and experiences.

We're holding the meeting in Monroe, in the heart of our Delta region. I know the conference will share innovative and effective strategies for fighting poverty. I look forward to sharing those successes with you in future DRA meetings.

The causes and results of poverty are easy to define but impossible to separate. Challenges in education, economy and health care are so closely related, meeting one challenge is impossible without meeting another. Solutions in one problem area, on the other hand, will lead to solutions in another.

So, do we merely sit back, study and ponder?

No, we take action. We look forward and develop a plan for the future ... but we begin moving now.

I propose a series of initiatives to tap into federal programs that the agency, as a whole, has yet to use. These efforts will target some of the core challenges of poverty. Acting as an authority – with the weight of all eight states behind it – these initiatives can succeed.

As we work to help the people living in our most distressed communities, we must do more to connect our citizens to quality, affordable health care. Poor and rural regions of our states – like the Delta – feel a large share of the pain of rising health care costs.

Many of our citizens lack adequate health insurance, and those in the poorest areas don't have any access to preventive, primary care at all. This lack of primary care stresses our Delta residents. Without that vital early medical care, they take time off work – or losing jobs altogether – in order to care for themselves or to help with sick relatives.

A push for more federally qualified health centers and rural health clinics will help us to address the problem of access.

I want the DRA to ask the federal Community Health Center Program for \$40 million to fund more and better local health centers in the Delta. In the last 15 months, seven new federally approved clinics opened in Louisiana. We also have four new rural health centers and nine more await certification.

This is great news, but we can do better, and we must. Working together, we can use the DRA as an engine for expanding these successes across the Delta.

We know these locally based clinics bring health care closer to patients. These clinics provide preventive medicine and wellness care. That eases the burden on our hospital systems and keeps our citizens healthier. Sick kids can't learn and sick parents can't earn.

We know that reaching and teaching our children early in life is key to later performance in school and life. I've pushed hard here in my first year in office to secure funding for our pre-kindergarten program.

I want the DRA to ask the federal government for \$25 million to fund pre-k programs in all eight states. That \$25 million is a down payment on solving some of our education challenges ... but this is the kind of investment in our children that will pay dividends for years to come.

We also need to ask the Rural Utility Service for \$20 million to help bring high-speed internet connections into the Delta. This grant would help all eight states accelerate their efforts to wire their rural areas with broadband connections.

In Louisiana, we want high-speed internet connections to be available to the ENTIRE state in five years. Broadband connections are a vital piece of infrastructure in the 21st Century – just as important as rail and highway connections were in previous centuries.

High-speed access links residents of rural communities to the kinds of advanced health care or education they could not find at home. High-speed access can connect rural businesses or farms to markets and customers around the nation or around the world.

The federal “Renewal Communities Program” must expand across the Delta. New and expanding businesses in designated Renewal Communities are eligible for federal tax credits and tax breaks. We've used the program to bring new jobs to Louisiana.

I know we can duplicate these successes across the Delta.

We must ask Congress to declare the ENTIRE Delta a “Renewal Community”. This will ease the task of attracting new jobs to all our Delta counties and parishes.

An improving economy means new jobs that will require new skills from workers in the Delta. Federal job training funds ARE available ... and, working together, DRA states can find ways to land more of that money. Working together, we can develop training programs that reach across county, parish and state lines.

Again, I know that we work better and smarter when we work together ... and share a vision. We share our knowledge and learning from each other's failures as well.

One common denominator in the eight Delta states is a connection to the Gulf of Mexico.

The Mississippi River flows through most of the Delta states and our neighbors in Alabama have the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway.

It is important that we recognize the transportation opportunities these waterways provide and the connections they provide to global markets. We must ask our friends in Washington to focus more transportation monies down here to help the Delta develop its port facilities and the highways that support them.

The DRA has landed infrastructure development grants in the past. We must concentrate these efforts on boosting our port facilities in the future. Better connections to the global economy will boost the Delta's economy.

All eight Delta states have great natural and agricultural resources. We must generate new businesses and industries that use those resources as raw materials to make products for sale across the nation and world. Creating new "value added" businesses will boost the Delta's economy in ways we cannot imagine. To fulfill that promise we will need healthy, educated and trained workers.

Those are goals we can achieve as we work together.

The Delta Regional Authority offers great promise to our eight states. But, that promise has waned during the last couple of years as leaders in Washington have cut spending on some of our most urgent priorities. Working together – all eight of us – we can reverse that trend.

The DRA was modeled after the Appalachian Regional Commission which the federal government created in 1965 to fight poverty in that rural area of the United States. Over the last 40 years, the 13 Appalachian states have developed a strong organization with influence in the halls of Congress and offices in the White House.

That influence has helped the Appalachian commission land more than a billion dollars of federal investments over the decades. I don't begrudge the region one dime, but I do know that we can do better for the Delta than the \$5 million the DRA received in the current budget year.

We need to fight—and I'm willing to lead the charge—to make sure Congress recognizes the Delta with the same level of commitment that they gave to Appalachia. The Appalachian commission has a history of success ... of pushing modern transportation into remote rural areas ... of fostering successful business-development programs ... and lifting people and communities out of poverty.

Working together, we can do even better in the Delta. We can boost education, create jobs and bring quality health care to our people and communities.

I look forward to getting to know you as we work together meeting these challenges.

Thank you.